

HENRY  
GELDZAHLER  
1935-1994

BY JONATHAN WEINBERG

Henry Geldzahler—first curator of Twentieth-Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, later New York City Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, critic, and art historian—died of cancer on August 16 of this year. Just before he died, Turtle Point Press published a beautiful edition of his collected essays, *Making It New: Essays, Interviews, and Talks*, which surveys his 30-year career in the arts. Although Henry Geldzahler was based in Southampton, New York, in the last 10 years of his life, he was no stranger to Provincetown. He spent seven summers here during the late '50s and early '60s at a crucial time in his formation as a curator of contemporary art. I worked for Henry as a curatorial assistant in the '80s and he included my paintings in "The Younger Underknown Exhibition" at the Dia Art Foundation in Bridgehampton. He was always very kind to me, made me laugh, and gave me useful advice (he said he was my "art uncle"). I miss him. But the following is not a personal

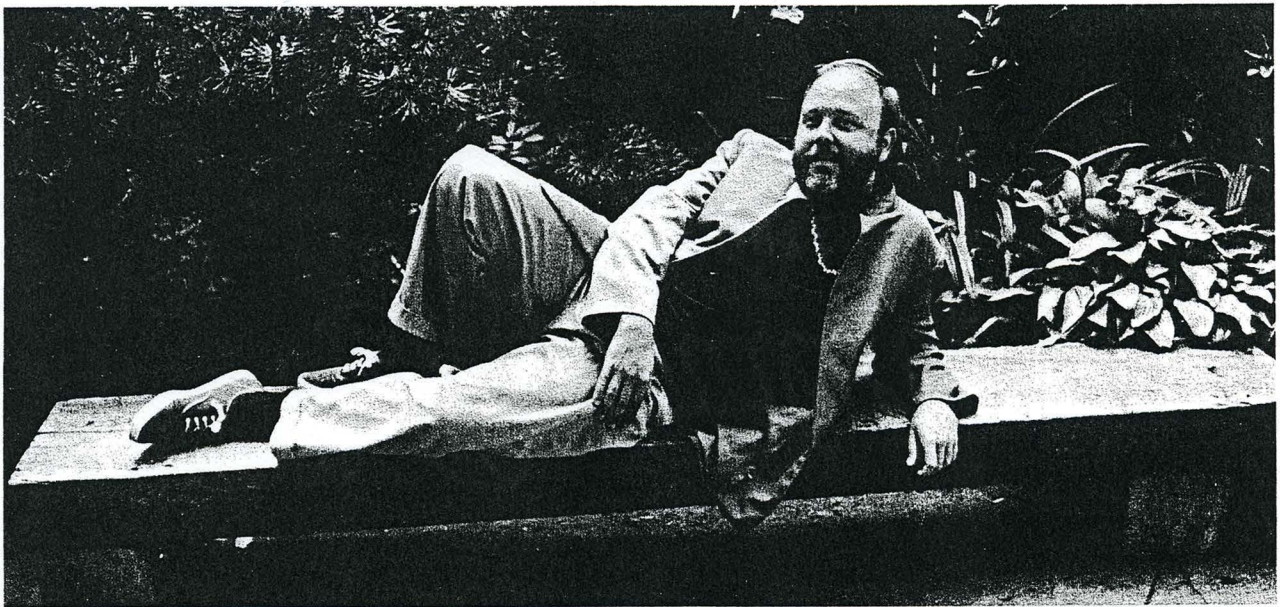
Picturing Henry

memoir. Rather it is an attempt to think seriously about his role in the New York art world. It seems to me that his career deserves many such assessments. When famous artists die, art historians quickly go to work writing obituaries, planning retrospectives and biographies, summing up the artist's place in history. We are less comfortable dealing with the death of one of our own. My colleagues and I wince when we hear that old chestnut, "art historians are to artists what ornithologists are to birds," but we are uneasy and uncertain thinking about our own role in the creation of those movements and careers which become art history. Significantly, most of the public responses to Henry Geldzahler's death have come from artists: Frank Stella, Francesco Clemente, and David Hockney. So far the academic community has had relatively little to say about the significance of Geldzahler's career. I suspect that this has something to do with a certain embarrassment about Henry. Undoubtedly many academics would not even recognize Geldzahler as a "serious" art historian. He never finished his doctorate but instead left the graduate program of Harvard Fine Arts Department in 1960 to work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a curatorial assistant in its American Art department. His stature among museum professionals is more secure—after all he fought for and oversaw the creation of a 20th-century art department in the premier museum in the U.S. Yet the museum world never seemed entirely at ease with Geldzahler. When Philippe de Montebello called him an "enfant terrible" in his remarks at the memorial held October 3, 1994, at the museum, he fell back on a convenient cliché to allude not so much to Henry's outspoken crusade to get the Metropolitan Museum to collect contemporary art, but to his scandalous life style. How many curators have been filmed taking

bath or have posed for a Dewar's Scotch advertisement?

Frank Stella called him "the last of the casual curators." What I think he meant is that Henry had little in common with the current crop of curators trained to conceive of exhibitions as occasions of scholarly debate with elaborate textual materials and ambitious catalogues. Henry still thought of museum shows as exercises in connoisseurship—choosing the so-called "best," judging quality by the "eye." In the '90s we have become rightly suspicious of the confidence with which Henry could pronounce on quality and we have become critical of his adherence to a canon that ignored almost all women and artists of color in his famous New York School Exhibition. Although he counted himself among the followers of Clement Greenberg's formalism he was never doctrinaire, never out to banish subject matter from art. Anti-puritanical to the core, he loved painting—figurative and abstract—that was vibrant in color. He was essentially a hedonist, and his shows were almost always about the pleasure of looking at painting and sculpture. He told Ingrid Sischy in the interview that introduces *Making It New*: "I look for beautiful things. I'm the pleasure seeker in the world. I spend my time reading, looking at art, looking at birds, listening to opera. I'm the sensorial viewer." Such pleasures have become unfashionable.

If Henry Geldzahler was "last of the casual curators" he also was a casual writer. He wrote often and well, but usually not at great length. He was not given to producing elaborate studies of artists' lives or artistic movements. He was at his best writing introductions for artists' catalogues and essays for exhibitions. *Making It New* brings together some of the best examples: essays on David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Dale Chihuly, Myron Stout, Francesco Clemente, and Alice Neel, among others; interviews with



HENRY GELDZAHLER  
PHOTO BY MOLLY MALONE COOK



Ellsworth Kelly, Larry Poons, and Georg Baselitz. In a sense, introducing artists was Henry's claim to fame in that he was known for "discovering" and nurturing major talent. He was among the first critics to champion Pop Art. At the famous 1963 symposium on Pop Art held at the Museum of Modern Art, Henry Geldzahler was alone among a group of distinguished critics to unambivalently embrace the new movement. But Henry was not so much of a critic of Pop Art as an insider. Andy Warhol credited Henry for giving him the idea for his *Disaster Series*, silkscreen paintings of airplane crashes. It also turns out that it was Geldzahler who suggested that Warhol make silkscreens of flowers. In later years he was instrumental in furthering the careers not only of Andy Warhol, but of Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Mapplethorpe, Dale Chihuly, Francesco Clemente, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The discoverers of genius play a curious role in the history of the avant-garde. Their fame rests not on their own creative talent but in their being at the right place at the right time. Such moments when a curator selects the unknown Jean-Michel Basquiat for inclusion in an exhibition, or the adventurous collector buys a Jackson Pollock painting for \$100 may have a kind of glamour unmatched by the details of the actual making of art. Undoubtedly, much of the hostility Geldzahler's career has raised has to do with his ability to be glamorous in just this way. But where many members of the New York art world "glitteratti" became haughty and pompous with fame, Henry remained always accessible and sensitive to artists. As Frank Stella put it, Henry believed that "to love art is to love artists." And long after Henry was no longer useful to their careers artists loved having Henry around.

David Hockney is the artist most closely associated with Henry Geldzahler. Fittingly, it is Hockney who introduces *Making It New* with a short hand-written foreword, while the best and most sustained writing in the book are the two essays by Henry on David Hockney's work. Geldzahler and Hockney first met in 1963 in what must have seemed to the young artist from England the satanic surroundings of the Factory, Andy Warhol's infamous studio and gathering place of artists, critics, collectors, drug addicts, drag queens, and hustlers. Later, in 1971, Henry Geldzahler was immortalized as one of the Hockney entourage in the film *The Bigger Splash*, a peculiar docu-drama of Hockney's artistic crisis in the early '70s that starred the artist and his friends all playing themselves. Henry was "cast" as a worldly figure who lures Hockney away from more stable surroundings in London, telling him that in New York he can paint and "night club." The film's director, Jack Hazan, seems to see Geldzahler as something of a devil. Hockney saw him in a different light. Hockney wrote in 1976 that in order to get right the one-point perspective of the painting "Henry Geldzahler and Christopher Scott" (1969), "he laid tapes from the vanishing point, which is about two inches above Henry's head, to the bottom of the canvas. At one point in the work there were about

20 or 30 tapes radiating from his head... it looked like an incredible radiant glow from a halo round his head, with an angel in a raincoat visiting him." But if "Henry Geldzahler and Christopher Scott" is an annunciation, with Henry the Virgin Mother and his lover Christopher the Angel Gabriel, what is being announced? The birth of a new Christ, i.e., the coming into being of the mature artist, Hockney himself?

Henry appears in another key work by Hockney, "Looking at Pictures on a Screen" (1977). He is shown studying reproductions taped to a screen of several of Hockney's favorite paintings in the London National Gallery. The viewer experiences an abbreviated tour of what is best in the museum's collection by means of Hockney's painting and Geldzahler's gaze. In the end it is not so much particular great works from the history of art that is celebrated—van Gogh's "Sunflowers" or Piero's "Baptism of Christ"—but a friendship and two closely linked sensibilities. Admiring Henry's taste is a way for Hockney to admire his own even as this mirroring of responses intensifies their passion for art. In the forward to *Making It New*, Hockney writes of travels in Europe going to "very out-of-the way places just to see one thing Henry had heard of." "One couldn't have a better companion looking at and searching out art. His eye is terrific, and trained as an art historian, different to mine, but between us we had a very rich time... To travel with an enthusiast seems to double one's pleasure."

Henry was not only a frequent subject of Hockney's art, he appears in the work of Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, Alice Neel, and others. One of the most interesting aspect of Henry's career is not the pictures he showed or wrote about but his knack for getting pictured. Hockney said the reason he drew Henry so much was that he posed, that is, he stayed still. But in another sense Henry was a poseur, a dandy, or, as Hockney also put it, an "incurable aesthete." He was not traditionally handsome. He was overweight and short. But by dressing with great style—bow-tie, brightly colored clothes that were dressy and casual at once, a big cigar, and loosely constructed hat—"he made of himself," in Francesco Clemente's words, "an image as good as a great painting." Henry seemed so pleased with the way he looked that according to Warhol he wore a mask of his own face to Margaret Truman's 1966 costume ball. There was a courageous aspect to this act of vanity, a refusal to mask himself. At his memorial service at the Metropolitan, Henry's homosexuality was never mentioned. But Henry's pose was that of an openly homosexual man. In contrast to so many closeted museum curators of the '50s and '60s this pose was not a pose at all, just as his mask was an image of himself. We cannot forget that being openly gay in the '60s took enormous courage—the closet was still the dominate

mode for most homosexuals. Even today gay politicians are still few and far between. When Henry was appointed to head New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs in 1978 he became the first commissioner in New York City to be openly gay. After retiring from politics in

the '80s he continued to act the part of the glamorous homosexual patron of the arts. With handsome young artist at his side, Scott Kilgour, he was featured in a Dewar's Scotch advertisement. For many this was Henry at his worst, crassly selling out. Yet remarkably Geldzahler charmed a major corporation into using an openly gay man to advertise their product. Typically he disarmed criticism with an amusing anecdote. Henry said that he wanted the caption to read "Scotch on the rocks, hold the Scotch," since in truth he did not

drink, but this was too much for Dewar's to swallow.

Hockney reported in the *New York Times Magazine* that Henry was posing right up until the end. He asked Hockney to draw him shortly after he heard he was dying: "you can see there was a sadness in his eyes. I realized he asked me to draw him simply because that's what he always asked me to do." There is also a sense of resignation. Although only 59, his close friends reported that Henry seem to accept his death. Perhaps he had been prepared for it. Henry Geldzahler, like many other gay men, had spent the last 15 years of his life attending the funerals of young men who had died of AIDS. He told Ingrid Sischy, "It's all a terrible loss. And it's a terrible anger. It's hard to articulate this, but you know, ... the extent to which they were important to us, and to the culture, is the extent to which they live on in their work." Unlike his artist friends he left behind no great body of masterpieces. But just as the gods bestowed immortality on those they loved, the artists Henry Geldzahler dedicated himself to have made sure that at least his image will last. Certainly David Hockney's extraordinary portraits of Henry made over their 30-year friendship will keep his memory alive. This is his reward for posing for so long and so well. ■

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